

## Research Article

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# Aquatic Matter: Water in Victorian Fiction

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**Abstract:** This essay looks at water in Victorian fiction and argues that it is important not just as motif or symbol—which is how literary criticism has traditionally approached it—but as a metamorphic substance. I propose a material ecocritical framework in order to conceptualise water as literary matter, and I analyse selected passages from four canonical Victorian novels through a focus on aquatic materialisation and transformation. I argue that through the emphasis on these processes in a variety of water scenes from *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *Dracula*, water emerges as not inert but agential. Through a material ecocritical approach which rejects intentionality as a precondition of agency, representations of nature as animate can be reconceived as not necessarily anthropomorphic or as instances of the pathetic fallacy, but as bearing witness to how agency is shared by humans and their environment.

**Keywords:** water, material agency, nineteenth-century literature, ecocriticism

## Water as Matter

Water has long been perceived as a potent literary symbol, and as Hartmut Böhme emphasises, water myths, water images, and water symbols form an extraordinarily rich field in all cultures (10). Literature shares the preoccupation with water with myth and religion, and the importance of water as both symbol and topos reaches back to the earliest existing examples of written literature, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. As Böhme asserts, water seems to be associated with virtually everything: he claims that “there is no feeling, no art, no speech, no act, no social institution, no space on this earth that is not materially or symbolically, directly or indirectly, connected with water” (12-13; my translation). The scope of water symbolism that transpires in this list as well as in other studies of water<sup>1</sup> points to its immense cultural vitality. And yet, Böhme deplores that the richness of water myths, images and symbols lies waste and no longer flows into a productive philosophy of water (10). He relates the interruption of this tradition to the separation between subject and object in the early modern period (11), as well as to a more general shift from natural philosophy to the philosophy of science in the nineteenth century (10). As technologically valuable information became more important, he argues, the knowledge of nature conveyed in art and philosophy lost influence. This is related to the change of attitudes towards nature during the industrial revolution. In simplified terms, he argues that humanity exchanged a weaker position which called for careful adaptation to powerful nature for a stronger position characterised by the assumed right to govern and possess nature (10).

Though the scientific tradition underlying the “mechanical order” (Merchant 192) implied in this shift of perspective reaches back much farther than the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> this is nevertheless a crucial

<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Judex explains the absence of a comprehensive literary history of water with the enormous wealth of cultural meanings and literary examples (195-6) of water. See also Bachelard, Lukas, Schenkel and Lember, Selbmann, Tetzner, and Woschitz.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Merchant's influential account (specifically 164-235).

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period for the study of the cultural significance of water as matter because water seems to be so strongly tied to the rapid and wide-spread industrialisation shaping this period, particularly in Great Britain. The industrial revolution, of course, is fundamentally linked to the successful instrumentalisation of steam—that is, water in its vaporous aggregate—and as such water appears to fit perfectly into the shift from a natural-philosophical to a technological-scientific view of nature which Böhme foregrounds. What I want to challenge, however, is Böhme's claim that this shift also reduced the cultural vitality of water images and symbolism. My analysis of the representation of water in Victorian fiction in what follows suggests that water imagery remains highly productive throughout the nineteenth century (and, in fact, into the twentieth and the twenty-first). Specifically, the high agentiality of water in literary texts contradicts narratives that equate technological mastery of nature with a passive environment. Instead, the manner in which water is described suggests that rather than perceiving of it as passive, Victorian writers were well aware of its potential to affect and influence humans and their bodies.

The methodological framework on which I draw in order to conceptualise the role of water in Victorian fiction is material ecocriticism. New materialists, on whose work material ecocriticism builds, reconceptualise agency as including nonhuman and material agency. This is related to a view of matter as not concrete and inert but as entangled and shifting; matter is understood as constantly forming and (re-) materialising. As a result, differences between various forms of matter are not viewed as absolute. New materialists “generally eschew the distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate, at the ontological level” and stress the enmeshed rather than distinct condition of these categories (Coole and Frost 9). As Jane Bennet emphasises, one aim is to “highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other. One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world” (4). I argue that Victorian water fiction frequently points to precisely this: water appears as a “vital player” that interacts with human characters and leaves its traces on their bodies and minds.

The focus on the entangled nature of humans and things also means that material ecocriticism does more than contemplate the role of matter alongside humans. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman make clear, “what the material turn is all about is not simply a joint consideration of matter and life” (450); rather, matter is itself viewed as “a field of distributed agency,” for which intentionality is not a prerequisite (451). This absence of willpower as a precondition of agency widens the field and also fosters a view of matter as “self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (Coole and Frost 9). Hence it paves the way for the rediscovery of “a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms ... and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency” (9). As Karen Barad emphasises in her agential-realist account of matter, “matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, *matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency*” (151).

The study of water in literature and new materialism can be mutually beneficial. A new material view of matter is helpful in conceptualising water as a substance that is neither discrete nor concrete nor static. Water flows; its molecules expand and contract in famously anomalous ways; it changes its material form in tandem with changing conditions (it vaporises, precipitates, freezes, or melts); it mixes with other substances which it dilutes or transforms (earth into mud, for instance); it is a part of human and other animal bodies. At the same time, the representation of water in previous centuries demonstrates that while new materialism might be a recent theoretical intervention, literature has a long tradition of depicting matter as agential. In nineteenth-century Britain, for instance, the agential nature of water became a matter of grave concern in the context of sanitary reform, since theories of disease aetiology held that dampness was productive of miasma and generated disease.<sup>3</sup> The anxiety which this vision engendered found expression in diverse special discourses, among them literature, where it was creatively rendered in images of aquatic agency and scenes of contact and intra-action between human characters and water. As this suggests, literature is able to give narrative form to the manifold material entanglements between humans and water,

<sup>3</sup> This medical theory and its cultural, social, and political repercussions have been widely discussed. See, for instance, Allen, P. K. Gilbert, Haley, Halliday, and Wohl.

entanglements whose degrees of intensity occasionally challenge the very notion of “the environment,” or of “nature” as a category separate from humanity.

This essay is a historical literary contribution to material ecocriticism. It explores the literary representation of a specific form of matter—water in its various materialisations, such as liquid, vaporous (fog), and solid (snow)—in a specific historical form (the Victorian novel). As the period in which the large-scale industrialisation of Britain and other western European countries was effected, the nineteenth century is often regarded as a crucial phase in the alienation of humans from their environment (for instance by Böhme, as quoted above). What my analysis of the literary representation of water challenges, however, is the notion that matter was thus re-conceptualised as inert and, specifically, that water lost its productivity as a vital source of imagery. Water, I contend, continued to be viewed as living matter, and its agentiality in literary representation demonstrates the persistence of this tradition also under the mechanical order.

## Of Fog, Ice, and Rain

The representation of water lends itself especially well to a material ecocritical approach because water exists in so many forms. Be it in the shape of various bodies of water (lakes, rivers, the sea), diverse atmospheric phenomena (clouds, fog, rain), or in its different aggregates, processes of materialisation shape the representation of H<sub>2</sub>O. It lies in the very nature of its metamorphic behaviour that water is almost automatically perceived as agential. The four novels on which I draw here (*Jane Eyre*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Dracula*) demonstrate this, as the constant movement and metamorphoses of water affect literary characters in myriad ways.

For my analysis, I draw on canonical rather than lesser known texts in order to show that such an engagement with water was part of a dominant and pervasive discourse. For the same reason, and rather than offering more extended readings of individual texts, I focus on only one or two water scenes in each of these novels. My aim is to indicate the proliferation of agential water scenes in Victorian fiction, and hence to suggest that the currency of such scenes signals a wider acceptance of water as animate matter.

My first example, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) begins with a scene of rain. This is indicative of the subtle importance of water for this novel. Even though there are no important aquatic events in this text, such as can be found, for instance, in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* or Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* or *Our Mutual Friend*, Eric Solomon draws attention to the fine web of “fire and water imagery” (216) which shapes *Jane Eyre*. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that fire and water are “so pervasive that they serve as a substructure for the entire novel” (216).

Solomon unearths a wealth of references to water which demonstrate that water appears as a steady presence in Charlotte Brontë's novel. Out of these, I am less interested in its metaphorical occurrences, such as when Jane's ability to control her emotions is indicated for Rochester by the fact that her “eye shines like dew” (qtd. in Solomon 216), than in instances in which water is actually present. The rain with which the novel sets in arguably precipitates its first crisis, Jane's traumatic experiences in the red-room and her subsequent expulsion from Gateshead. It is, after all, the fact that a “cold winter wind,” “sombre” clouds, and a “penetrating” rain (Ch. Brontë 19) keep the Reed family from their habitual outdoor exercise that leads to the confrontation between John Reed and herself and, ultimately, also to her forced confinement in the red-room.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Jane describes the rain as “penetrating” is illuminating here, because it suggests that even when viewed from a distance, from the inside of the house, the ability of water to enter the human body sticks out. When Jane is sent away from the cosy family circle and seeks a quiet nook in a separate room, her thoughts about the rain emphasise precisely this: it cannot be shut out.

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, the scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast. (20)

<sup>4</sup> Jane's cousin John, a bully, tries to allay his boredom by humiliating and quarrelling with Jane.

Jane might be protected from the rain physically in this scene, but she obviously finds it difficult to extract herself from its influence mentally: as she reads her book, she is repeatedly drawn to the watery landscape outside. This is symptomatic of the oppositional structure which many critics see in *Jane Eyre*, as expressed, on the one hand, by the contrast between water/ice and fire (Lodge, Solomon) and, on the other, between “the world within,” which Sandra M. Gilbert characterises as “claustrophobic,” and the “world outside,” which is “almost unbearably wintry” (476). In this opening scene, this second landscape is also mirrored in the pages of the book Jane is reading: Bewick’s *History of British Birds* fascinates her through its depiction of lonely aquatic regions, such as “the bleak shores of Lapland,” “the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone,” or “the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray” (Ch. Brontë 21). Jane finds these sublime scenes “strangely impressive,” experiencing them like “all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children’s brains” (21). She is famously “glad” to be able to remain inside (20), but the outside world still fills her mind. Despite its hostility, the cold and wet beyond the window and beyond the pages of Jane’s book beckon: she is aware of the fact that even inside the window seat, she isn’t separate from the rain and the mist of “the drear November day,” and she finds the desolate reaches of the icy north oddly riveting. Her consciousness is in constant interaction with the natural environment, particularly the aquatic environment, both as represented on the page and as a spectacle in front of her window.

Many critics interpret such instances in terms of the pathetic fallacy. David Lodge, for instance, relates the importance of the elements in *Jane Eyre* to “images of nature as affected by weather, and the extensive use of the pathetic fallacy” (127), while Eithne Henson contends that the “opening paragraph of the novel exemplifies the pathetic fallacy, simplest of all traditional landscape uses, where the desolation of scene and season simply echo the emotional desolation of the child” (29). Apart from the fact that Jane’s assertion that she was “glad of” the bad weather (Ch. Brontë 20) contradicts any such easy equation,<sup>5</sup> I believe that to foreground the material rather than only the metaphorical in this opening scene, and in the analysis of literature in general, allows one to complicate the relation between humanity and nature in what is commonly explained as the pathetic fallacy, and thus to reconceptualise this device. As Neil Evernden argues, the “extension of the boundary of the self into ‘the environment’” that ecology and biology advocate also leads to the recognition of the environment as “animate” and to humanity-nature relations as interactive (101). If one accepts that ecology postulates, according to Evernden, that “[t]here are no discrete entities” (93), then “all the metaphorical properties so favored by poets make perfect sense,” also from the perspective of science: “the Pathetic Fallacy is a fallacy only to the ego clencher” (101).

In new materialist terms, the “extension” which Evernden posits here is envisaged as shared agency. As Bennett puts it: “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (xvi). In this sense, anthropomorphism, or the literary device of the pathetic fallacy, is a tool that can convey an idea of agency as distributed among a variety of actants; if nonhuman nature is animate, it is also agential, irrespective of intentionality. As a result, the ‘*inter-relatedness*’ (93) which Evernden foregrounds is partly re-conceptualised to accentuate the entangled nature of agency.

Such a vision of entangled agency comes to the fore in my second example from Charlotte Brontë’s novel, namely two passages from the Lowood section. Here, the emphasis is on the metamorphic nature of water and on its potential to transform not only itself but also the human body. The first passage consists of Jane’s first description of the grounds of the school:

now, at the latter end of January, all was wintry blight and brown decay. I shuddered as I stood and looked round me: it was an inclement day for out-door exercise; not positively rainy, but darkened by a drizzling yellow fog; all underfoot was still soaking wet with the floods of yesterday. The stronger among the girls ran about and engaged in active games, but sundry pale and thin ones herded together for shelter and warmth in the verandah; and amongst these, as the dense mist penetrated to their shivering frames, I heard frequently the sound of a hollow cough. (58-9)

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Kullmann also notes this, even as he draws attention to the parallels between the weather and Jane’s mood and situation (361).

Jane's first impression of the grounds of Lowood school is one of disagreeable dampness. Though the day is not "positively rainy," the description of the "drizzling yellow fog" emphasises its wetness, the fact that it is a form of water. As a result, fog is not merely presented as a passive presence, but it is marked as a "source of action" (Bennett viii), an actant: it drizzles and the tiny particles of which it consists penetrate other things and substances. Indeed, this aspect is subtly woven into all the references to water in this passage, as when Jane emphasises the condition of "all underfoot" as "soaking wet" as a consequence of the strong rainfalls of the previous day. Water infiltrates its surroundings and effects material metamorphosis; solid ground turns to mud as the earth becomes saturated with water. The effects of fog and rain as represented here are typical examples of how actants—defined as "acting agents, interveners" by Latour—"modify other actors" (75), highlighting the agentiality and transformative potential of water. This comes to the fore in the vision of the group of girls huddling in the verandah like a flock of wet sheep. This depiction of the girls' reaction to the "drizzling yellow fog" draws attention to the affinity between human and non-human animals: like a herd of sheep in wet weather, the girls seek "warmth" in a cluster of bodies. In addition, the intra-action between fog and humans here also signals a more ominous change. The "dense mist" infiltrates the girls' bodies and exposes their ill health. Indeed, the fact that we cannot tell from this quotation whether their cough is caused by the mist or whether it is the fact that their physical condition is already poor that makes them suffer from the chilly fog is significant because it shows that human condition and state of health are entangled with and not separable from environmental circumstances. What is clear is that the combination of poor health and fog is harmful: the "shivering frames" and "hollow cough" of the "pale and thin" girls indicate emptiness and metaphorically anticipate their demise.

The connection between fog and the materialisation of illness is explicitly set out a few chapters further on, in chapter 9 of the first volume, where Jane describes the onset of spring and how the new season alleviates some of the hardships of the school. As April approaches and finally turns into "bright, serene May" (84), Jane is able to enjoy a *hortus conclusus* which is "all green, all flowery," and to which a great many "wild primrose plants" give a "pale gold gleam" of the "sweetest lustre" (84). However, the peaceful tranquillity which Jane describes in such pretty detail is treacherous:

Have I not described a pleasant site for a dwelling when I speak of it as bosomed in hill and wood, and rising from the verge of a stream? Assuredly, pleasant enough: but whether healthy or not is another question.

That forest-dell, where Lowood lay, was the cradle of fog and fog-bred pestilence; which, quickening with the quickening spring, crept into the Orphan Asylum, breathed typhus through its crowded schoolroom and dormitory, and ere May arrived, transformed the seminary into an hospital. (85)

In this quotation, agency is very explicitly ascribed to the environment and to aquatic matter. The damp vale produces fog, and fog, in turn, creates disease and death. Interestingly, the fog both breeds and is bred, a fact that points to its malleable nature: it evolves out of other substances (here, the moist ground of the "forest-dell") and in this very process also produces something other than itself, namely "pestilence." The impression conveyed by Jane's description is of multiple metamorphoses, a chain reaction in which moisture functions as trigger: the humid terrain brings forth fog, which brings forth disease, which is, but is here depicted as bringing forth (i.e. as "breathing") typhus, which turns the school into "an hospital." Jane imagines fog and disease as contagious intruders creeping along the corridors stealthily and like thieves and this highlights the agential component of the scenario she describes. In her version of the typhus epidemic at Lowood, the disease is an evil spectre that actively transforms the school into an infirmary.

Such a representation of fog and other manifestations of water as agential is no singular occurrence but is, in fact, typical of engagements with water in Victorian fiction. When George Eliot describes how "the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea" in *The Mill on the Floss* (9) and when Charles Dickens depicts the Thames as "playfully gliding away among the trees" in *Our Mutual Friend* (497) or, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and in a very different mood, writes about the drowning Quilp that the "strong tide filled his throat, and bore him on, upon its rapid current" (512), water is represented as an actant. What is particularly interesting about examples such as the second quotation from Dickens here is that water is also frequently presented as agential without being anthropomorphised. In this way, by eschewing

even a metaphorical link between aquatic agency and explicitly human action, Dickens's text sidesteps the automatic classification of agency as essentially human property.

While the representation of water as agential is frequent (in anthropomorphic as well as in non-anthropomorphic contexts), the specific portrayal of aquatic matter as spectral (as in the example from the Lowood section of *Jane Eyre*) is more typical of the genres of gothic and sensation fiction. In Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), for instance, the description of the wedding of Lady Audley's maid Phoebe, an event that is part of a larger web of bribery and deception, is rendered uncanny by the focus on the foggy weather. The fog makes the landscape in which the wedding takes place "undistinguishable" and "uncertain"; the cattle on the meadows by the church are "blinded," and the village children and animals appear "strange and weird of aspect in the semi-darkness" created by the "yellow fog" (110). Charlotte Brontë (whose *Jane Eyre*, of course, has strong gothic elements as well) and Braddon clearly share a language when it comes to the description of fog, a language that contests the notion of the human body and aquatic matter as discrete entities and foregrounds, instead, the material communication and exchange between the two. This is particularly noticeable in the following description of Phoebe Marks as a figure whose very identity is brought into question by the manner in which she is affected by her surroundings. Phoebe is sketched as a

very dim and shadowy lady; vague of outline, and faint of colouring; with eyes, hair, complexion, and dress all melting into such pale and uncertain shades that, in the obscure light of the foggy November morning, a superstitious stranger might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vaults below the church. (Braddon 110)

In this passage, the image of melting is used to indicate Phoebe's curiously indeterminate corporeality. She is described as a watercolour whose pale colours run into each other to produce "uncertain shades" rather than clear figures. This haziness is further increased by the comparison with a "ghost," which, together with the adjectives "dim" and "shadowy," emphasises the fact that her blurred "outline" is not clearly distinguishable from the surrounding landscape. Phoebe is associated with this watercolour effect already in her very first appearance in the novel, where her "absence of colour" is mirrored by her dress, whose "pale lavender muslin faded into a sickly grey." Just as in the wedding scene, moreover, this effect is also associated with "melting": "the ribbon knotted round her throat melted into the same neutral hue" (25).

Even though in another passage Phoebe is characterised as "a person who never lost her individuality," as someone who "seemed to hold herself within herself, and take no colour from the outer world" (131), this emphasis on her distinctness runs counter to the manner in which she is depicted on her wedding day. However, "seemed" is the crucial word in the second quotation, for even though Phoebe certainly attempts to keep aloof from her surroundings, her life-altering flaw is precisely that she does not manage to "hold herself within herself" in at least one crucial respect. It is because she betrays the fact that she has witnessed Lady Audley's apparent murder of George Talboy, Lady Audley's first husband, to her cousin Luke that she is forced to marry the latter in the first place. Thus the fog and the rendition of her own melting into the foggy atmosphere of her wedding day symbolically point to Phoebe's own disposition as indiscreet.

The fact that Braddon chooses the terms "melting" and "melted" here is significant because it links Phoebe's condition with a larger discourse that connects water and aquatic metamorphosis with a threat to identity.<sup>6</sup> Phoebe leaves her position in Lady Audley's household against her will, and the loss of self-determination and self-respect entailed in her marriage is expressed in her comparison to a ghost melting into the fog. As the following examples suggest, snow scenes also share in this discourse. In fact, it is hardly surprising that they tend to be more direct and vehement in their depiction of material interaction and transformation since the conditions under which water turns into snow are potentially destructive to the human body.

<sup>6</sup> Consider, for instance, John Harmon's near-drowning experience in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, which results in a loss of identity which lasts for most of the novel. Pip in *Great Expectations* likewise undergoes an identity crisis in the fog scenes during which he meets the two criminals in the early chapters of the novel. Other examples are the social ostracism to which Maggie Tulliver is subjected as a consequence of her river trip with Stephen, which destroys her reputation in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, and Tom's transformation into a water-baby and threatened permanent metamorphosis into an aquatic creature in Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*.

The potential violence of the encounter between human character and snow is foregrounded in the snowstorm that takes place in the first chapters of Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847), when one of the attempts by Lockwood, the homodiegetic narrator of the frame narrative, to socialise with the family of his landlord Heathcliff leads him to make a badly timed visit during the onset of a blizzard. What starts as "the first feathery flakes of a snow shower" (E. Brontë 7) as Lockwood is about to reach Heathcliff's house, quickly becomes more serious as the snow begins "to drive quickly" (8). Lockwood's fundamental inability to read his unfamiliar surroundings correctly is expressed in his misinterpretation of the situation. He believes that the snow will be of short duration and of little impact, but Heathcliff quickly corrects his naivety:

"Half an hour?" he said, shaking the white flakes from his clothes; "I wonder you should select the thick of a snow-storm to ramble about in. Do you know that you run a risk of being lost in the marshes? People familiar with these moors often miss their road on such evenings, and, I can tell you, there is no chance of a change at present." (10)

Lockwood's first description of the snow suggests a purely aesthetic approach: the "first feathery flakes" imply a prettiness that reminds us that Lockwood has fled the comforts of his own home because his sense of beauty was affronted by the "spectacle" of a servant girl trying to light a fire (7). His own shivering in the cold as the snow commences to "drive" more quickly is soon forgotten in the warmth of the parlour of *Wuthering Heights*, as demonstrated by his belief that he will be able to return home after a brief half hour's visit. Heathcliff's view of the snow points to a more existential dimension. For him, the snow poses an active danger—not only to humans but also to animals, as his first reaction to the start of the actual blizzard shows: he orders his nephew to ensure their sheep are safely sheltered. Indeed, even Lockwood is ready to acknowledge the destructive potential of the snow when he looks at the changed landscape: "sky and hills mingled in one bitter whirl of wind and suffocating snow" (12). Faced with this material transformation beyond the window, with the unfamiliar aspect of the country and with the prospect of already "buried" roads (12), he realises that he cannot survive in this hostile environment, and the reference to suffocation acknowledges this physical danger. The snow has literally changed the heath beyond recognition and is thereby also showing Lockwood the limits of his ability to steer and predict the outcome of his own actions in this altered environment. He realises that he is now at the mercy of both his hosts (on whom he depends for but from whom he does not initially receive guidance) and of—to him, alien—natural forces. His attempt to apply familiar social conventions to the English north has failed, and he is faced with a new dynamic of interaction with and reaction to circumstances beyond his control.

Emily Brontë takes Lockwood's loss of control further when she combines the environmental with the supernatural in the next chapter. Once again, the representation of aquatic agency as uncanny and spectral supports the gothic here. Lockwood is lodged in the former room of Catherine, Heathcliff's deceased beloved and soulmate. During the night, Lockwood has a nightmare in which the sounds of the "driving of the snow" (20) and of a branch against the window morph into the sound of Catherine's ghost knocking against the pane. In Lockwood's dream, the branch becomes a "little, ice-cold hand" (20) that seeks to enter the room. Cathy's ghost scratches and beats against the window, almost dislodging the "pile of books" (21) that Lockwood has pushed against it to block her entrance. When Lockwood tells Heathcliff of this occurrence, he presents his nightmare as reality: he is convinced that "the place is swarming with ghosts and goblins" (22). But when Heathcliff subsequently opens the window in an attempt to call back Catherine's ghost, the snow has once more taken her place: "The spectre showed a spectre's ordinary caprice; it gave no sign of being; but the snow and wind whirled wildly through, even reaching my station, and blowing out the light" (23). Heathcliff is eager to embrace the supernatural, but what he actually lets in is a different force of nature, the "snow and wind" that immediately invade the room, filling and altering it with signs of their material agency.<sup>7</sup> The snow, in this instance, even behaves like a ghost, for the sudden extinction of light is, of course, one of the stock signals of otherworldly apparitions.

<sup>7</sup> This scene also proleptically refers to the end of the novel, when Heathcliff's housekeeper will tell Lockwood how her master was found by his open window, with "the rain driving straight in," dead and "washed with rain" (256).

That the snow can serve as the ghost's surrogate in this scene and that the two are even able to exchange places points to an affinity between them: both are material expressions of potentially uncanny metamorphoses and transmutations. Lockwood feels threatened by both: by the snow, once he has realised that a northern country blizzard is an existential rather than a merely aesthetic affair that literally changes the world beyond recognition, and by the ghost, which shocks him with its sudden intrusion. It is the snow that has the more lasting effect on him, however. As he makes his way home through snow drifts, he loses his way and catches a cold, a circumstance which leads to "[f]our weeks' torture, tossing and sickness" (71) and the prospect of longer confinement indoors. Lockwood, obviously, is in need of a long period of protection from the world outside in order to recover from his encounter with ghost and snow.

The susceptibility of the body to the potential of material metamorphosis which this snow scene from *Wuthering Heights* indicates is formulated yet more hauntingly in Bram Stoker's 1897 gothic novel *Dracula*, my final example. I focus on the last section of Stoker's text, where Dr Van Helsing, the vampire specialist, and Mina Harker, who has been bitten and is on her way to becoming a vampire, drive through the Transylvanian Carpathians towards Castle Dracula for the final confrontation with the count.

Count Dracula and Mina are already linked through blood and water, two fluids that they have exchanged and shared. Mina has been forced to drink Dracula's blood and has herself been bitten by him, and this has established a connection which Van Helsing exploits when he hypnotises Mina in order to get access to Dracula's mind. Under hypnosis, she shares the Count's auditory perceptions and can identify his location by the sounds she hears. Mostly, this is the lapping of water, because Dracula is travelling in the hold of a ship. As Van Helsing and Mina get closer to Castle Dracula, however, Mina finds it more and more difficult to go under, and she is able to report less and less about Dracula's whereabouts. It is as if, in the cold of the Carpathian Mountains, the channel between the Count and Mina were becoming blocked—or, one might say, freezing up.

Freezing is more than a cheap pun here because as Van Helsing and Mina drive deeper into Transylvania, Mina's body appears to change in response to the climate. As snow begins to fall, her bodily functions are reduced, and her metabolism slows down: she sits "still all the time—so still as one dead" and grows "whiter and ever whiter till the snow [is] not more pale" (Stoker 316), as if ready to blur with the wintry landscape. She stops eating and, as Van Helsing records full of alarm, "sleeps, and sleeps, and sleeps!" (313). In short, like an animal, she goes into a form of hibernation. This indicates that she is leaving behind her humanity, as a human body would not be able to survive long inactivity or sleep in the snow: its metabolism would shut down, and death would follow. Mina, by contrast, is "bright as ever" (314)—as Van Helsing notices with unease, she "looks so well as I never saw her" (315). Not only is Mina's metabolism thus protected by sleep, like an animal's body during hibernation, but it is also refreshed and re-invigorated: hers is a vampiric hibernation. In the falling snow of the Borgo Pass, Mina is pulled towards the other, her vampire, side. Previously the personification of purity, she now lies to Van Helsing, wakes only at night, and then only to watch the doctor with luminous eyes (315). She also begins to look like Dracula's female companions, and even though Van Helsing exults about "the terror in her sweet eyes, the repulsion, the horror" when they materialise in order to tempt her (317), there are obvious similarities between the vampires and Mina, who has begun to "look in her sleep more healthy and more redder than before" (315).

Significantly, the vampire sisters materialise in a swirl of mist and snow as apparitions that continue the close association between water, human death, and vampiric embodiment in *Dracula*.<sup>8</sup> Nature is, in Van Helsing's expression, "at lowest," deadened by the blizzard which is becoming stronger all through the night: "the snow came in flying sweeps and with it a chill mist" (316). If the snow appears to benumb everything and to erase all sounds into "dead, grim silence" (316), however, the snowflakes themselves are extraordinarily animate, dancing and whirling through the air out of which they mould strange figures: "it seemed as though the snow-flurries and the wreaths of mist took shape as of women with trailing garments" (316). If initially, this seems to be a mere trick of the eye, it gradually becomes clear that Van Helsing and Mina are witnessing an uncanny materialisation. The snowflakes are turning into the shapes of the female vampires:

<sup>8</sup> From his arrival in England onward, Dracula manifests himself primarily as fog and mist.



It was as though my memories of all Jonathan's horrid experiences were befooling me; for the snow flakes and the mist began to wheel and circle round, till I could get as though a shadowy glimpse of those women that would have kissed him. ... the wheeling figures of mist and snow came closer, but keeping ever without the Holy circle. Then they began to materialize, till—if God have not taken away my reason, for I saw it through my eyes—they were before me in actual flesh .... (316-17)

The snowflakes here literally metamorphose into undead bodies. The impression conveyed is of a bizarre gravitational force that pulls the flurries of snow into a concrete form and succeeds in chemically transforming frozen water into "actual flesh." Textually, this transmutation is prepared by an intricate web of tropes that connect water, fog, coldness, and vampires, while culturally, the images at work both in this passage and throughout the novel rest on a preconception of water as a shape-shifter, a metamorphic substance that constantly rearranges itself into different material forms. As such, these images of water as both transformative and constantly re-forming itself also rely on a conception of water as intrinsically agential. As the other examples discussed in this essay suggest, the beckoning women that materialise out of the whirling snow and Mina's gradual slide into a vampiric form of hibernation in Stoker's *Dracula* are only two of the most extreme and haunting formulations of how water interacts with human bodies as part of its ceaseless re-materialisation.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

As Jules Law observes in his discussion of blood, milk, and water, a study of Victorian engagements with fluids must look beyond the symbolic: "fluids in the Victorian period were not simply a metaphoric or symbolic means of negotiating the relationship of the individual to an increasingly complex and rationalized public space, but a principal (and highly contested) medium through which social relations were actually negotiated" (12). To acknowledge water as matter and to consider how its materiality surfaces in literature directs attention also to the concrete physical contacts between human characters and water and hence to the reciprocity of influence in their engagements: it is not only humans that do things to water, but water also acts on humans. I have only stressed the latter aspect here because it tends to be ignored in the accounts of the mechanical order which my readings challenge.

By foregrounding material agency and by providing a critical vocabulary and toolkit for the analysis of their representation, material ecocriticism encourages an intra-active view of agency that also points to the limits of human control over the environment. Consideration of water and of its role in Victorian fiction is illuminating in this respect because it can expand the focus on human social relations which the Victorian novel seems to invite. The characters which appear in the aquatic contexts discussed here are subject to not only human and social but also environmental influences: Jane's attack on her cousin is provoked by his bullying and leads to her expulsion from the family home; but the weather at least contributes to their confrontation by creating the conditions of boredom and confinement which lead to John's harassment of Jane in the first place. Likewise, Mina's transformation into a vampire accelerates in the snowy environment of the Borgo Pass and is echoed in the literal materialisation of *Dracula's* female companions from snowflakes.

As my material ecocritical analysis shows, the representation of water in the Victorian novels from which I have taken my examples goes beyond the passive expression of character mood traditionally conceptualised as the pathetic fallacy. Water is not merely used to underscore events in characters' lives, though it can, of course, be put to this end. Frequently, however, character mood is directly influenced by rather than only symbolically expressed through different appearances of water, whether these take the form of atmospheric conditions, weather, or concrete bodies of water. And equally often, these two functions are not separate but inextricable. In *Jane Eyre*, to return to this text once more, the effect of fog and rain entails but also goes beyond the creation of atmosphere and specific domestic conditions or the consolidation of Jane's mood. It also helps forge Jane's awareness of her inability to separate herself from

<sup>9</sup> Among the most significant formulations of this belief in the agentiality of aquatic matter are Victorian theories of disease aetiology, as mentioned above.

the world outside, thus indicating (and, through its plot function, arguably amplifying) her need to escape the confines of Gateshead. Likewise, it points to the course of her future life which will, amongst other things, be shaped by the dampness of Lowood.

One of the key questions that ecocriticism has raised in the past is how the environment can be made to speak to readers outside of the logic of anthropomorphism. Material ecocriticism, I believe, offers one possible answer by highlighting the fact that agency is not a human prerogative. To represent nature as agential or even animate does not necessarily entail the projection of human characteristics onto it. There is a rich, albeit partly buried, tradition of viewing matter as agential, which means that rather than revolutionising concepts of materiality, ecocriticism is actually re-opening our eyes to what literature has always known about shared agency. As quoted above, Bennet suggests that we might have to harness anthropomorphism in order to reconcile us to a recognition of material agency (xvi); going beyond this, I suspect that material ecocriticism has the potential to challenge the concept of anthropomorphism in itself. Because water fictions highlight the role of water as a metamorphic and materialising substance that interacts with humans in myriad ways, they show that material agency transcends the conceptual horizons created by anthropomorphism and the pathetic fallacy.

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